

CHRISTMAS: IN FAITH WE WELCOME AND RECEIVE THE LORD

**First Sunday after Christmas
December 31, 2006**

**1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26
Psalm 148
Colossians 3:12-17
Luke 2:41-52**

Celebrating the Family

Families are like stones packed together on the banks of a stream. When you scan the stones from a distance, they look a lot alike. But when you get down on your knees and examine them closely, you see their individual colors, grains, chips, faces, and angles.

This Sunday we celebrate a special family, the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. Like a collection of stones viewed from a distance, this family looks like a lot of other families. It is loving, care-giving, and nurturing; its members balance work, home, civic and religious obligations, and they cope with stress and anxiety.

Luke's passage for Holy Family Sunday (Luke 2: 41-52) gives us a close-up look at a very special family. This pericope is the only story in the Gospels that tells about the childhood years of Jesus. Bible experts cite several reasons why Luke included it.

One reason offered is that of pointing to the similarity between the childhood of Jesus and that of the Old Testament prophet Samuel, who spent time in the temple of Shiloh and about whom it is said that, like Jesus, he grew in wisdom and strength (1 Samuel 2:26). Another is to show that Jesus was a precocious young man, who deeply loved and closely studied the law of Moses and who could discuss it intelligently with experts in the law.

Other experts suggest that Luke uses the story to remind us of Joseph's special features. He is Jewish, and belonged to the royal house of David (Luke 1:27). He lived in his hometown of Nazareth, in the area called Galilee (Luke 2:39). A carpenter by trade, Joseph and his wife, Mary, not only raised Jesus, but cared for other children as well (Mark 6:3). Each year Joseph took his family to Jerusalem, a trip that was part religious obligation, part family vacation.

Some experts note that Mary, like Joseph, was a Jew. She came from the same hometown, Nazareth in Galilee. Her family betrothed her to Joseph at the usual age for Bible times, probably early to middle teens (Matthew 1:18). Her surprising pregnancy put

her at great risk (think of the stoning today of pregnant, unmarried women in some societies). Joseph almost did not marry her, but changed his mind when he learned that the pregnancy was from the Holy Spirit (Matthew 1:19-20). And Mary had a prodigious memory (Luke 2:19; 51). She most likely supplied many stories about Jesus to the apostles and evangelists when they began preaching about her son, Jesus the Christ, and writing their gospels about his life and ministry.

The Holy Family played a very important role in the faith of Jesus' first followers. In fact, some of these first followers loved the family's special features so much that they wrote additional gospels in the second and third centuries. *The Protoevangelium of James*, for example, identifies Mary's parents as Joachim and Anna, and tells stories from her own infancy and childhood. *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas* also tells many imaginative stories about Jesus and his childhood playmates.

As we focus on Jesus and his earthly family, we call to mind that Jesus, the Son of God, extends the boundaries of kinship and welcomes all of us who believe on him into the family of God (Mark 3:35).

This week's Reflection was prepared by Dr. Robert Hodgson, who serves on the staff of the American Bible Society as Dean of the Nida Institute for Biblical Scholarship.

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This week we remember to pray for the work of the Bible Society in: New Zealand – With thanks to God for the many Bibles, New Testaments, and Scripture Portions distributed throughout the country and for those who support Bible work with their prayers and gifts, and with prayers for the ongoing translation work in Maori and Tokelauan; **South Pacific** – With thanks to God for partnerships being forged with other Christian and aid organizations, and with prayers for God's guidance in implementing the Leadership and Community Development program; **Papua New Guinea** – With thanks to God for the progress of the Hula (Vulaa) Old Testament translators and for the support of their local church, and with prayers for funds to continue this work and for the revision of the Motu Bible.

Activity Corner: “What I Like About You” Celebration
Supplies needed: Bible; copies of Christmas Carols

Invite members of your household to stand in a circle and read Colossians 3:12-17 together. After the reading, have one person begin by saying what they like most about the person standing to their right. Continue going around the circle until everyone has had a turn. Conclude by singing “Joy to the World” or several of your favorite carols.